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## Keywords

Talal Asad, colonialism, anthropological theory, modernity

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## Putting Power in Order

Phil Shadd

Talal Asad looms large over socio-cultural anthropological theory of the last quarter of the twentieth century. His early work, for which he has become such a noted anthropologist, represents a self-critical break with anthropology's previously uncritical past. In *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*, Asad shows that anthropology is a colonialist enterprise which derives its authority and legitimacy primarily from political rather than academic interests. While this argument is evident in his introduction to the book, the paper which Asad also contributes to the book's canon, further elaborates upon this break with the past that has been necessitated by the revelation of anthropology's power-dependent status. *Two European Images of Non-European Rule* is an incisive paper that illuminates the insidious and highly connotative ways in which structural functionalist anthropology has traditionally objectified the Other. The other works of Talal Asad that I reviewed for this paper extend an analysis of relationships of power to the contrasting realms of religion and secularism. In the introduction to *Genealogies of Religion*, Asad intimates that religion is an important tool in developing historical narratives that coherently situate author and character both in reference to one another, and in reference to the passage of time. Published ten years later, *Formations of the Secular* explores the emerging explanatory power of secularism. According to this book's introduction, secularism seems to be the newest expression of modernity; moreover, it mediates power within cultures and between them.

In this paper, I will argue that Asad's primary ongoing critique is not of the political entity that is the West, nor is it of anthropology as an academic discipline, nor is it of any one of many other issues that are implicated in Asad's far-reaching theories of relationships of power (for example, the hidden epicenters of power, the watershed transitions in the analysis of power, the functional power of ideas, among others). Instead, his primary critique is of modernity as an ordering idea. In all of Asad's writings which I reviewed for this paper, modernity is the dominant conceptual framework which gives rise

to the various topics that he addresses, and which is ultimately impugned by his writings. I will make my argument in the following way: For each of the four pieces reviewed, I will first provide a more complete summary of the piece's contents. In doing so, it will become apparent that, for Asad, modernity is consistently a major concern. Secondly, I will identify and present the particular critique of modernity that Asad makes in each of the four pieces. By appreciating the four aspects of modernity to which Asad takes exception in these writings – neutrality, coherence, comprehensiveness and demythologization – it will become clear that no other topic is of greater concern to him than modernity as an ordering idea. Asad's career is most celebrated for his seminal work on various relationships of power, particularly the kind that have existed between the colonizing West and the colonized Other. Nonetheless, he demonstrably believes that the idea of modernity is a topic in greater need of critique than is the topic of these relationships of power.

Asad's introduction to *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* provides a historical sketch that sets the stage for the multifarious ways in which the rest of the papers in the book self-reflexively critique anthropologists' record of interaction with their objects of study. This historical sketch also identifies one of the most important shortcomings of the modernist idea. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, led by ethnographic giants such as Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Pritchard, the British structural functionalist approach defined anthropology (Asad 1973a: 9-11). In a supremely systematic and rigorous manner, structural functionalism demanded that ethnography be done by participant observation. The entity to be observed was invariably a group of people who were perceived to be clearly bounded off from other groups of people with whom they may have had interaction, but who were perceived to be irreconcilably different. All of the various aspects of the group's life were assumed to be internally integrated, coherent and intelligible. Moreover, this group had to be exotic – what now may be referred to as the "anthropology of the ordinary" had yet to be practiced – and, as such, was often African. The social groups into which structural functionalist anthropologists academically categorized African people were labeled as tribes. In this way of doing ethnography, the distinction between the ethnographer and the object of study is unmistakably sharp. Such anthropology is

characterized by clearly discernible boundaries, security and certainty.

At the time of *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*'s publication, anthropologists had not yet examined the way in which structural functionalist anthropology is embedded in colonial power structures. Asad states that while ethnographers from the West are rarely assimilated by the foreign cultures they study, "primitives" who are transplanted into Western society often do conform to their host culture. He makes this observation as a simple evidence to prove his case that anthropology has traditionally been grounded in differential accesses to power (Asad 1973a: 17). In his sketch of history, Asad notes that a self-critical crisis engulfed structural functionalist anthropologists in the 1960s, as anthropologists expressed discontentment with the illusory certainty and paternalistic condescension that characterized this approach (ibid: 12-13). Although this discontentment grew throughout the 1960s, *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* was the most influential anthropological treatise that identified and articulated the reasons for which anthropology needed to undergo a transformation. By the time of the book's publication in 1973, anthropology was already and tenuously experiencing this change.

It is important to note that the structural functionalist approach is only one aspect of a larger modernist worldview that completely enveloped the academic world in the decades prior to the publication of this first work of Asad that I am reviewing. In this work, Asad questions whether the modern worldview's ideal of neutrality is a realistic possibility (Asad 1973a: 17-18). The modernist mind demands the sort of empirical certainty that can only be achieved by purely objective methods. In science, this modernist demand entailed strict adherence to the scientific method, a method intended to foolproof the findings of experiments from the subjective biases of the experimenter. This absolute emphasis on empiricism also had serious implications on the way in which anthropology was conducted. Unless ethnographers could glean information from a standpoint that was as objective as that assumed by scientists who apply the scientific method, then the intellectual legitimacy of their information would pale in comparison to that produced by the hard, or "pure", sciences. Consequently, anthropologists adopted the structural functionalist approach, with its

undeniable distinction between the observer and the observed, as the basis for its claim to objectivity. It was this space between ethnographers and their objects of study that lent credibility to structural functionalist conclusions. Although Asad does not place his explanation of structural functionalism within the broader context of the modernist idea, he does note that his anthropological predecessors claimed political neutrality (Asad 1973a: 17). Being politically neutral is but one of the ways in which anthropologists sought objectivity. In his introduction to *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*, Asad does not discuss other attempts at neutrality that will later become of greater concern to him, types such as religious and ideological neutrality. However, his critical reference to the success with which anthropologists were able to achieve political neutrality in following the structural functionalist method, is sufficient to demonstrate his concern with the modernist enterprise in general. Ethnographers prior to Asad claimed political neutrality, but failed to deliver.

One paper, which Asad himself contributes to the collection that is found in *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (Asad 1973b), explicates, with greater specificity, the way in which Western ethnographers objectified their objects of studies. He does so by considering the interaction between structural functionalists and Orientalists. In so doing, he implicitly urges the reader to critically consider another aspect of the modernist approach – Orientalism. In the course of Asad's comparison of "Islamic orientalists" and "functionalist anthropologists", it becomes evident that the pitfalls of structural functionalism parallel those of Orientalism (ibid: 104). Orientalists tend to project their understanding of inefficient political organization onto Oriental, particularly African, societies because they associate authoritarianism with being primitive, a state in which they categorically presume their non-Western objects of study to exist (Asad 1973b: 109). Ethnographic analysis provided by such Orientalists is subject to multiple failures; the projection of the West onto Oriental cultures can happen both analytically and practically. When those who wield political power in Oriental cultures are more representative of the wishes of the general populace than are politicians in the supposedly democratic political systems of the West, it is clearly inaccurate to construe such Oriental political power-brokers as megalomaniacal authoritarians. Where such

portrayals are accurate, Orientalists fail to realize that totalitarian power structures are not primordial, but are the result of political upheaval wrought by colonial powers that were ignorant of, and indifferent to, the pre-existing political structures they forcibly dissolved. It was possible for misrepresentations of this magnitude to exist in ethnographic literature prior to the 1970s because anthropologists had yet to ask themselves critical questions. Remember that Asad's early work, as has already been mentioned, is touted for the self-critical questions that he was a leader in asking. To articulate this superimposition of false political systems upon their objects of study by colonial anthropologists, Asad relies on Marxist language that has the unique ability to capture the inequality that made these exchanges of power possible. He notes that anthropology has been "nurtured within bourgeois society" (ibid: 103). Both structural functionalism and Orientalism are rooted in bourgeois ideas of class, domination, and power.

While the primary issue of this particular article is the misrepresentation of African political systems that exists among structural functionalists and Orientalists alike, the explanation that Asad provides, for why these misrepresentations exist, returns to a critique of the broader issue of the modernist worldview. In their quest for rational certainty, the ideologues who bequeathed the modernist mindset to the generation of anthropologists that preceded Asad, demanded bodies of facts that were not only empirically verifiable, but also ones that were coherent. Consequently, ethnographies were written in a manner that associated non-Western societies with primitive, unsophisticated and underdeveloped characteristics that align with a presumed place of inferiority. Such ethnographies were intended to coalesce with the model of cultural development that Western society had adopted to situate itself in a place of superiority with regards to other societies. By stating that this demand for coherence produced a generation of ethnographers who ignored the way in which their Western preconceptions influenced their observations, Asad does more than merely critique anthropology as a dimension of the colonial enterprise. He also critiques the modernist demand for coherent conclusions that was required of all types of academic writing, including ethnographies.

The introduction to Genealogies of Religion was published twenty years after

Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter had broken ground in critiquing anthropology as a colonial tool used to reconstruct exploitable characterizations of the colonized. While the issue that Asad addresses within the modern conceptual framework changes from colonialism to religion, he continues to challenge the modern mind's propensity for constructing partial and partisan understandings of self-identification. In this introduction, Asad expresses his interest in exploring the "systematicity" with which individuals and societies construct the historical narratives in which they perceive themselves to be taking part (Asad 1993: 7). Historical narratives contain roles and events that are similar to those which can be found in literary narratives. Asad, hearkening back to his former analyses of the colonial encounter and the power differentials therein, states that history in a Shakespearean sense can be understood as a series of improvisers who respond creatively to a dominant narrative of which they are both a product and a producer (ibid: 11-12). In this introduction, Asad also questions the role of autonomy in the construction of self-situating historical narratives (ibid: 12). In the development of such narratives, there is a dialectic between those who possess the power to publish the story – publishing in the same way that it is the victors who write the histories of war, the victors who write the accounts that are disseminated in the wider world – and those who are the protagonists in the story, namely, the Nuer in an ethnography of the Nuer, Oriental people in an Orientalist analysis, Muslims in a study of the Islamic world, etc. Asad acknowledges that this dialectic is real, but he questions the amount of real power that the protagonists have in comparison to the publishers. Asad rejects placing the agent and subject in the same conceptual space (ibid: 16). Neither does he believe "local knowledge" to be reliably local. He says that "local knowledge" is often merely knowledge about locals (ibid: 9). For these reasons, Asad concludes that constructed narratives are, indeed, partial and partisan. These comments are appropriate as an introduction to his book entitled Genealogies of Religion because he asserts that religion is an important tool of historical construction.

In critiquing self-situating historical narratives borne of religious convictions, Asad is challenging the idea of modernity, in addition to challenging any one account of history, whether Western, Islamic or otherwise. The particular aspect of modernity that he critiques in this

introduction is modernity's criterion of comprehensiveness. As a result of this criterion, we have seen ethnographies that purport to analyze every major aspect of a complex society in a single volume; we see science's vain search for a so-called "Grand Unifying Theory"; and we see the rise of postmodernism, which rejects, above all else, this meta-narrative. In this introduction, Asad expressly states that he does not reject essentialism, as one might presume based on his critique of modernity. Instead, Asad argues that a humbler, less dogmatic form of essentialism is necessary to hold historical paradigms together (Asad 1993: 18). Asad seemingly acknowledges that anthropologists must hold historical narratives lightly. This acknowledgment is in the spirit of Thomas Kuhn; a paradigm shift must occur in the realm of science when the preponderance of discrepancies apparent in a given paradigm outweighs that paradigm's explanatory power. That is, anthropologists who are steeped in modernity are at risk of grasping too firmly an illusory account of history. Whether the narrative is a primarily religious, cultural, or political one, Asad asserts that anthropologists must avoid the modernist pitfall of the comprehensive meta-narrative by being ready to rewrite history from the viewpoint of the protagonist rather than that of the publisher.

Further development of Asad's thoughts concerning both religion and modernity is evident in the fourth work of Asad that I reviewed for this paper, the introduction to his book, published in 2003, *Formations of the Secular*. In this introduction, Asad expresses his intention to conduct an "anthropology of secularism", and provides some contemporary history on secularism in various Western societies, principally America and Britain (Asad 2003: 4). Whereas the previous works of Asad that we have considered in this paper have dealt with the West's interaction with non-Western societies, the cultural scope of this book is restricted to secularism as a phenomenon of the modern West (ibid: 1). The aspect of secular states which Asad highlights, is the lack of direct access to the government that exists in such states (ibid: 4). Even though such states have undergone what I will call a "demythologizing" of the public square, they retain a politically hierarchical structure that has both advantages and disadvantages.<sup>1</sup> One outcome of a cultural

process of demythologization is the zealous separation of church and state. Thus, while it is unclear why Asad belabors a discussion of political hierarchy, a phenomenon that presumably exists ubiquitously, albeit variously, in human societies, I infer that he is highlighting the fact that secular states remain highly bureaucratic despite the exit of the notoriously hierarchical church from the mainstream of political power. Even though secular democratic states theoretically provide, for citizens of all ideological stripes, the most effectual channels of influence from bottom to top in political hierarchy, the influence that is exercised from the grassroots upwards is usually mediated through elected officials who, as Asad realistically notes, variously represent and misrepresent the political will of their electorate (ibid: 5).

In this introduction, Asad also critiques a second, and more fundamental, dimension of secularism. According to him, not only do secular states possess political systems that are persistently hierarchical, but ones that are also demythologized. Moreover, we see that demythologization is a more influential phenomenon than hierarchy in contemporary secular states because politics is but one of several institutions in the public square of Western societies that have been demythologized, though all of these public institutions remain at least somewhat bureaucratic. While secular governments strive to distance themselves from the appearance of political hegemony, they strive more strenuously to distance themselves from the vestiges of religious influence. While a call has gone out in the modern West for more representative democracy, a louder cry has gone out for the fundamental adoption of relativistic tolerance as society's philosophical worldview. Asad suggests that such marginalization of religion often leads to caricatures of religious practitioners in the popular, public mind. In particular, Asad cites the West's pigeonholing of the global Islamic population since 9/11 — a population of one billion adherents that spans a vast spectrum of cultural contexts, religious

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the nineteenth century. In their attempt to historicize the Bible, these Biblical critics assumed the *a priori* position that the miraculous in Scripture was tantamount to mythology. The real was narrowly equated with the natural, and "supernatural" became a euphemism for the fanciful. Subsequently, demythologization has ramified both theologically and politically.

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<sup>1</sup> I am familiar with this term as one that emerged from the higher Biblical criticism conducted by German theologians in



enactments and understandings of *jihad* (Asad 2003: 11). Moreover, according to Asad, even if the Qur'an does prescribe religious expressions that are deemed politically or morally objectionable in the contemporary world, that prescription does not mean that autonomous Muslims are obligatorily bound to enact such interpretations of Qur'anic texts (ibid: 10).

By critiquing the stereotypes of discrimination and ignorance that are produced by a demythologized secular state, Asad makes a double entendre. He simultaneously critiques secularism, in specific, and modernity, in general. In an effort to free themselves from what they perceived to be the religious superstitions of the past, the authors of modernity insisted upon explanations that were stripped of any references to the supernatural. Facts about the universe that transcended the material world were no longer facts – they were myths. Public universities were demythologized from being principally Judeo-Christian institutions to being secular ones. Furthermore, in the same way that secularists were granted a monopoly over the production of knowledge, any activity in the public square, not least of which was politics, was deemed fair and acceptable only if it was also demythologized. Since demythologization is the process that supplants the religious ethos upon which a society has been historically based, secularism and demythologization are inextricably linked processes.<sup>2</sup> Whereas Asad explicitly addresses the former, he implies the latter as a function of modernity. Critiquing demythologization in his introduction to *Formations of the Secular* is yet another manner in which Asad continues his challenge to the idea of modernity.

In this review of Talal Asad's work over a span of thirty years, I have demonstrated that his most persistent concern is not with anthropology itself, nor with relationships of power, but with the illusory and damaging ways in which the idea of modernity can serve as the central ordering principle in individual and collective minds. In his introduction to *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*, Asad states that modernity has failed to deliver the neutrality which itself demands. Later in that book, in a paper entitled *Two*

*European Images of Non-European Rule*, he demonstrates that modernity's insistence upon coherence has come at the expense of accurate representations of a culturally diverse world. In the introduction to *Genealogies of Religion*, he undermines the ability of a modern meta-narrative to be as comprehensive as the idea of modernity demands that it be. Finally, Asad's writing from *Formations of the Secular* reveals his concern about the demythologization of Western society that modernity has precipitated. In these works, the idea of modernity is the framework within which ideologues have respectively ordered a structural functionalist approach to anthropology, a model of cultural development, a partial and partisan self-situating historical narrative, and an impassable gulf between the church and state. Asad objects to all of these ideational constructs. In doing so, he repeatedly and primarily assaults modernity as an ordering idea.

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<sup>2</sup> I differentiate between secularism and demythologization in the following way. Secularism refers to the formal removal of religious influences and expressions from public institutions. Demythologization refers to the informal removal of immaterial, spiritual and supernatural ideas from the worldview that is held by the general public.